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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV LE SY IS SA

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMENIAN TASHNAQ PARTY WANTS ITS OWN INDEPENDENT BLOC

REF: A. 08 BEIRUT 1781

1B. 08 BEIRUT 1729

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a February 15 meeting with visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member Perry Cammack and the Ambassador, Armenian Tashnaq party leaders stressed that their primary goal was the establishment of an independent Armenian bloc in parliament, an objective which would be facilitated by an alliance with Saad Hariri's Future Movement and March 14. Nonetheless, they said, Hariri had not yet shown any interest, primarily because of their demands that Armenian candidates be chosen by Armenian parties (rather than by Hariri), and that their bloc be allowed to vote independently based on the needs of the Armenian community. They highlighted that an Armenian bloc would be a "natural center" in the politics of Lebanon, and could help achieve consensus. They doubted Hariri would offer them an alliance before the elections, and noted that Michel Aoun, in whose bloc Tashnaq MPs currently sit, had thus far respected their independence.

¶2. (C) The Tashnaq leaders assessed that Hizballah had not lost support after taking up arms against their fellow Lebanese on May 7, 2008 by casting the government's decision to shut down the Hizballah communications network at that time as a "pro-Israeli decision." They believed the best way for the U.S. to help Lebanon in the coming months would be to promote stability in the region, by facilitating a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria, pushing Israel to withdraw from the Sheba'a Farms, and promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace. End summary.

ARMENIAN PARLIAMENTARY BLOC?

HARIRI NOT INTERESTED

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¶3. (C) Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member Perry Cammack and the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff and EconOff, called on Armenian Tashnaq SYG Hovig Mekhitarian, Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradounian, and former Tashnaq minister Sebouh Hovnanian at their headquarters in Bourj Hammoud on February 15. Mekhitarian stressed his community's pivotal

position in the upcoming electoral races in the Metn, Beirut, and Zahle, and said his party hoped to be able to form an independent Armenian bloc after the June elections. The Tashnaq leaders explained that the best way to ensure the formation of such a bloc would be an alliance between Tashnaq and Future's Saad Hariri, and they expressed frustration that Hariri had not reached out to them on such a possibility despite their many efforts to seek a formal meeting.

¶4. (C) While Tashnaq's "old friend" Michel Murr, the Greek Orthodox power broker from the Metn, had approached Hariri repeatedly on the issue, Mekhitarian said they had heard nothing from Hariri, who was resisting the idea of Armenian parties (two of which are now allied with Future) choosing their own candidates for the election, as well as the concept of the independent bloc, which would not necessarily vote with Future in parliament. Pakradounian complained that the Armenians had suffered from the previous electoral districting, under which Tashnaq candidates received as much as 95% of the Armenian vote and a majority of the Christian vote, yet lost because of Sunni voters casting their ballots for Hariri's list and against Tashnaq. "The Armenian MPs do not represent Armenians," said Pakradounian. (Note: Tashnaq boycotted the 2005 elections in Beirut to protest this phenomenon. The new electoral districting negotiated at Doha in May 2008, dividing Beirut into three districts, should improve Tashnaq's chances. End note.) Pakradounian added that the Future Movement's Armenians are "on the payroll," and not given leeway to express the views of their community. He noted that Tashnaq had tried as recently as May 2008 to ally with the other two parties to be able to form a joint

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Armenian bloc, but Hariri would not let his allies participate in such an alliance.

"WE ARE THE CENTRIST BLOC"

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¶5. (C) While Mekhitarian said Tashnaq had not yet decided on its lists, he did not believe Tashnaq would reach an alliance with Hariri before the elections. Nonetheless, the leaders expressed confidence that Tashnaq would increase its representation in parliament beyond the two seats it now holds by continuing its alliance with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun. "We have no problem with Aoun," said Pakradounian. "We have an alliance but have kept our independence, and he respects that." He recalled that he had contacted Aoun on several occasions to express disagreement on an FPM position, and Aoun had agreed to make his statements on behalf of his party and not his bloc.

¶6. (C) Mekhitarian mentioned current discussions of a potential independent or centrist list centered on support for President Sleiman, and said he did not believe the President would back such a list officially. "He told us he will not interfere in the elections," added Pakradounian. Nonetheless, Pakradounian claimed that historically, the Lebanese parliament always had many groupings, and Tashnaq was often at the center, a bridge that provided a basis for stability in the parliament. "We are calm, moderate. We believe in dialogue and equilibrium. We are the centrist bloc," he said.

¶7. (C) In that vein, the leaders all expressed support for a national unity government following the elections. They felt strongly that the government should reflect the confessional make-up of Lebanon, and rejected the idea of a government that left out entire confessional groups, which would occur should either side try to govern independently.

HIZBALLAH AFTER MAY 7

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¶8. (C) Cammack asked the group if Hizballah had suffered any loss of support following its use of weapons on fellow

Lebanese on May 7, 2008. Pausing for a moment to reflect, the leaders collectively sighed and then shrugged. Pakradounian said Hizballah escaped much criticism, because it portrayed the event as the result of a provocation by the GOL: the government was seen to have made a "pro-Israeli decision" to shut down Hizballah's communications network, which amounted to an attack on the "resistance." And in the end, he added, the May 7 clashes led to the reconciliation at Doha, which overtook previous events and allowed for the election of President Sleiman, clearly a positive development.

ADVICE ON U.S. POLICY

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¶9. (C) When asked what U.S. policy initiatives might best support Lebanon, Pakradounian said, "Unfortunately, the Lebanese problems cannot be solved in Lebanon." The Tashnaq leaders stressed the importance of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria for ensuring that the Lebanese elections go smoothly, given the two countries' support for competing political forces in Lebanon. They asked for an international push for an Israeli withdrawal from the Sheba'a Farms, which would remove a pretext for Hizballah's weapons and allow Hizballah's political allies to apply pressure on it to disarm. Finally, they supported a strong drive for Israeli-Palestinian peace, which would ease tension regionally and potentially provide a solution to Lebanon's difficulties with its Palestinian refugees.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) Although Saad Hariri had told the Ambassador on February 13 that he thought he would be seeing Tashnaq "soon," FPM leader Michel Aoun told us on February 14 that

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"as far as I know, Tashnaq is still with me." End comment.

SISON